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ABSTRACT

The paper describes the major needs of gifted rural students and suggests ways parents can use nonschool as well as school resources to help meet those needs. Students need guidance to deal with their differentness, to evaluate their strengths and weaknesses, and to make plans for the future. Parents are advised to gather information and create a profile of their child outlining areas of need as well as strengths. Students need broader opportunities for academics, non-academics (such as fine arts and visual arts), and personal contacts for age-group friendships and career role models. Suggestions are offered for making optimum use of resources from within the community and beyond. (CL)

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PARENTING THE RURAL GIFTED

Mark Ellett Pitts

It is easy to think of several reasons for raising children in the country rather than in the city: Rural areas provide a greater sense of health and safety; a closeness to nature; and the neighborliness of small town or country life. Families with gifted children, though, may feel a sense of frustration at not being able to understand or meet their children's needs.

Schools in rural communities are one source of help in providing for gifted children, but should not be the only source. Some rural schools have made sacrificial commitments to excellent programs. More typically, though, the budgets, leadership, and even personal stamina of rural school staffs are pressed to the limit (Anderson, 1979). The material which follows describes two of the major needs of rural gifted students and suggests ways parents can use nonschool, as well as school resources, in seeing that those needs are met.

Guidance

The Needs

Guidance is a critical need of gifted students in rural areas (Birnbaum, 1978). First, they need guidance in dealing with their differentness. Normally, the further a school is from an urban center, the less diverse it's population is. This means that in the more homogeneous rural schools, students who are different in their behavior, activities, interests, aspirations, or appearance will "stick out." Because their peers are less used to dealing with differences, gifted students in rural schools are more likely to face adjustment problems, particularly if they aren't also strong in areas their peers admire: sports, music, appearance, or leadership or social skills

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(Birnbaum, 1978).

Second, they need guidance in evaluating their strengths and weaknesses. Guiding any student on the basis of observed characteristics is difficult. Guiding gifted students on the basis of uncentered, unrealized potential is much more so. Parents of students who are doing well in a rural school have the added concern about whether the child's apparent success is due to genuine giftedness or to low academic expectations for children in the local setting.

Third, gifted students in rural areas need guidance in making plans for the future. Gifted students are often good at more than one thing. This makes goal-choosing difficult. In addition to this, rural gifted students and their parents often have limited knowledge about the exotic kinds of careers their talents might suggest.

Some Suggestions

There is no perfect way to guide a gifted child, and parents are sure to overlook or misjudge some possibilities. There is an orderly route that parents can take in their search, however.

First, gather information. The school can help with information about your child. Call ahead to make an appointment with the principal, a counselor, the librarian, and the teacher or department chairman in your child's strongest area. As you speak to school personnel, be positive about what the school has done and sympathetic about the demands made upon them. Stress that you want to do your part in the cooperative process of providing for your child. Ask for copies of your child's records and test results. Standardized test results, when used carefully, can provide valuable insight into your child's ability compared to the ability of children nationwide. School personnel can

help you interpret test results, and can recommend a psychometrist or psychologist if you would like to have supplementary academic or personality testing done. Also ask school personnel for their insights into your child's interests, needs, goals, level of social adjustment, and career strengths. Especially at the secondary level, guidance departments and the school library will have career information which can help your child prepare a set of career choices and understand the qualifications they call for.

Second, create a profile of your child. This may sound a little formal, but you and your child need to sit down with the information, and possibly with a knowledgeable third party, to outline areas of need. Consider areas in which your child demonstrates strengths. The evidence may be good test scores, good grades, strong interest, comments from school personnel, your child's own opinion, or a combination of these. Also try to help your child define areas of need. "Need" in this case is not a failure to be perfect. It is a handicapping inadequacy. A "B" in English would not qualify. An inability to communicate clearly would. Shyness probably wouldn't qualify, but a total lack of friends probably would. Once the profile is completed, you are ready to go into the second area of concern: the need for broader opportunity.

Opportunity

The Need

Gifted students in rural areas need broader opportunities. One element of this is a need for more intense academic opportunities. Small schools, whether urban or rural, have difficulty meeting the needs of special populations. Staff members must often teach several

different classes, giving them less opportunity to develop strengths in the narrow specializations which challenge gifted students, particularly at the secondary level. Also, many academic areas don't attract enough students to fill a class. Nevertheless, gifted students need the opportunity to pursue areas of strong academic ability or interest, whether the interest is in foreign language, writing, the sciences or the arts.

A second element is the need for broader opportunities in areas of non-academic interest. Almost by definition, rural students are isolated from professional theatre, music, drama, and dance, as well as unusual special interest groups, "high-tech" hobbyists, and the like. Often a sentence in a magazine or a segment from a television show will spark interest in a gifted student far beyond the capabilities of the local community to sustain it.

A final element is the need for appropriate personal contacts. Gifted students, particularly in rural areas, need stimulating age-group friendships and career role models. Students in large communities have many people to choose from in their search for friends and role models. Rural gifted students need relationships with people their own age with whom they can talk, share concerns, and attend activities. The reputation some gifted students have for being antisocial is often simply a manifestation of the frustration of trying to find someone with similar interests and aspirations. At the same time, gifted students need an opportunity to visualize themselves in careers for which their aptitudes suit them. This requires contact with an appropriate career role model.

Some Suggestions

First, make optimum use of resources within the community. Schools may not have resources for developing total programs, but they can demonstrate good will by offering genuinely gifted students opportunities like acceleration, Advanced Placement, and credit for correspondence home study work.

The school can also give you information about available resources. Schools get mailings about summer camps, contests, scholarship opportunities, special interest clubs, state or regional programs for gifted students, and names of contact people for parents' groups and state department of education personnel. State personnel can provide contacts with state or regional gifted associations and universities with special interests in gifted education.

The school and public libraries can provide books, records, and language cassettes to interested students, but also, a notice on the bulletin board about the area of interest may provide additional resources or acquaintance with someone who has similar interests. Scouting, 4-H, and other youth clubs have divisions or awards programs geared to special interests, many developed in the last few years to cater to current interests of young people. All of these options should be investigated as readymade ways to meet some needs of your gifted child.

Second, many resources can be brought to the community from the outside. Through the mail, rural gifted students can have access to correspondence courses, mail order merchandise from "gifted" or special interest catalogs, pen pals, special interest magazines or book clubs, and connections with many national student organizations. Through a telephone equipped with a computer and modem, students can hook up to such national data bases as Compuserve or Viewtron which provide a

variety of services including interest-based "party lines" upon which students can share information and express opinions. Television, particularly since the advent of cable, videotape, and sattelite, is sadly underused as an educational tool. Students interested in the arts, politics, or science will find many programs available on the air or on tape. Networks often provide viewing guides for educational programming to people who ask for them. Check your TV Guide for network addresses.

The highway that runs through the community can bring additional resources. A foreign exchange student can provide a tremendous resource to your gifted child and to your family as a whole. Other groups which are willing to come into your community must be sponsored by a school or community organization. In the arts, traveling groups from metropolitan or university theater companies, symphonies, or art museums are often available for performances or exhibits in outlying areas. In some cases such organizations have access to funds to underwrite going to culturally deprived areas. A state arts commission can provide information about such opportunities. Utility, automobile, and electronics companies often provide science or technology programs as a public service.

Summers, vacations, and weekends provide time for students to take advantage of opportunities outside the community. Few communities in America are more than a couple of hours away from a university or community of some size. Parents of gifted children should make sure they are on the mailing lists of organizations which sponsor activities of interest or benefit to their children.Rural students with urban relatives should take the opportunity to trade visits with "city cousins" for the benefit of both parties. Weekend or summer "gifted camp" experiences are especially valuable for their combination of

challenge and positive peer contact. Often friendships made at such camps can be made permanent with the help of letters, phone calls and visits.

Opportunities for contact with possible career models are hard to arrange without connections. Sometimes these connections can be cultivated through a gifted camp experience; sometimes connections can be made through university gifted programs, by contacting recent university graduates in a student's area of interest; sometimes relatives, church friends, or members of a local service organization like Kiwanis or Tri Kappa may be able to provide an introduction.

Summary

Parents of gifted children in rural areas can play a significant and helpful role in seeing that the needs of their children are identified and met. To do so requires time, work, creativity, and knowledge. While strong school gifted programs should be encouraged, parents need not depend totally on school to recognize and meet the needs of their gifted children.

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Birnbaum, M.J. Educational Problems of RUral Education for the GIfted. in Ideas for Urban/Rural Gifted/Talented: Case Histories and Program Plans. Los Angeles: National/State Leadership Training Institute on the Gifted and Talented, 1978.